

JAIME HINTON: LETTER FROM A RABID PLANT COLLECTOR IN MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

Excerpts of a letter from Jaime Hinton to B.L. Turner are reproduced to illustrate some recent plant collecting experiences in México.

KEY WORDS: México, plant collecting, Hinton

The literature is replete with accounts of early plant collectors in North America, especially México, along with their trials and tribulations (*e.g.*, Berlandier 1805-1851; Seemann 1825-1871; Pringle 1838-1911; etc.). Indeed, George B. Hinton (1882-1943), the father of Jaime Hinton whose exploits are touted here, was a renowned collector of Mexican plants; much of the senior Hinton's activity has been chronicled by Hinton & Rzedowski (1972; *J. Arnold Arb.* 53:141-181).

These early Mexican collectors were an unusual breed, often risking (and sometimes losing!) their lives in the hope or realization that their discoveries in the field might enrich all of botanical science, to say nothing of the long-time legacy of their exploits, resulting eponymy, or whatever. In those bygone days when practically every plant collection stood at least a fifty-fifty chance of being undescribed, the impetus for collecting in remote, previously unvisited areas, must have been irresistible to many, if not most.

But what about modern collectors? Have they outlived the perils of collecting, the sense adventure and discovery that accompanies the field worker on a sortie to some out-of-the-way site (albeit only 10-50 kilometers along a dirt road from some paved major highway)? Obviously not, to judge by a recent letter written to me by Jaime Hinton, giving an account of his and his son's attempt to collect in the remote mountainous regions of Nuevo León, México. One might argue that "the hunt" of present day collectors has never been more exciting, simply because what is expected in the way of novelties is drastically reduced. Thus the reward of discovery is vastly enhanced, not to mention the knowledge and sense of intellectual responsibility that the educated, environmentally informed collector must feel as he treads the few remaining wilderness

areas looking for a last survivor of man's pernicious onslaught upon pristine habitats, most of this brought on by the senseless rampant reproduction of mankind and the consumptive consumerism that accompanies such activity, a consumption eating at the well springs of biodiversity everywhere.

George Hinton, his son Jaime and his grandson George represent three generations of plant collectors in Mexico, all avid students of that nation's flora. I never met the deceased member of this trio, but I know personally and correspond erratically with the second and third generations, both zealous collectors like their forefather George. Since this "introduction" is largely meant to accompany excerpts from a letter written by Jaime, I will digress here to attempt some encapsulation of Jaime Hinton's physiognomy, personality, character, and style.

Jaime is a wiry, resilient man about 5 feet 10 inches tall with the gait of a western cowhand, what with his certain, unobtrusive, strides and his ambience of belonging to his particular territory. A Mexican citizen, but of British parents, green-eyed and greying at the temples, he first walked up to me wearing a large Tarascan sombrero and a wisp of smile, extending his hand, "Prof. Turner, I assume," eyeing my newly married quite lovely wife Gayle (25 years or more younger than either of us) as if she might be a remarkable flower to be plucked precariously off some Mexican bluff given the odd discovery, wherever. Good sensible man, I thought, excellent tastes. And, later, settling down as his guest at Rancho Aguililla, I marveled at his conversational abilities about plants, architecture, peoples, commerce, and world affairs. He was a consummate scholar and litterateur, and as to bearing he reminded me right off as a protagonist from one of John Huston's westerns, "Treasure of the Sierra Madre", perhaps. Whatever; I was enthralled. Later my wife said, "An attractive man, Jaime", I knew then that his peripheral glances were properly catalogued.

The day after our first meeting Jaime insisted that the two of us take a short field trip to the mountains east of Cerro Potosí. He took off in his souped-up Ford at 100 plus miles per hour. Truly, the fastest I'd ever traveled in an automobile. When I tactfully complained at the speed ("What's the rush?") he grinned, like Socrates might have, given the same admonition from his friends about sipping too fast his extract of hemlock, and responded "Hell, I can't wait to get in the field, not much time left in the day", or something like that, as if I too were wrapped up in his provocative enthusiasm. Anyway, he slowed down to 95 or so for the rest of the paved road, then down to 50 on dirt, and finally lurched to a stop high up in the hills along an overgrown semitropical gully, taking off upslope like a botanist bewildered, collecting what was in flower or fruit, commenting on environmental degradation, the catholic condition, confessions, confusions, whatever. Ten years older than me, perhaps, he was clearly better shod with a better bridle.

But on to a single long excerpt, from his most recent letter, which I repro-

duce here with his permission. And only over protestations of a sort: he would not wish ostentation or advertisement. I responded, "Me neither, but future generations ought to know the tribulations of plant collectors working in this part of our century, how they knew absolutely that this was their last chance to do something meaningful for mankind's intellectual pursuits, that someone cared about what once was here, please . . ."

He relented and the excerpts follow.

Dear Billie:

June 25, 1993

. . . We're hard at work in El Viejo, where we notice quite a few species that were new when we collected them at other places not so long ago. But we still hope to find some interesting things, especially some of those intriguing little orchids named by Carol Todzia. Once done with El Viejo, then I can sell the four-wheel drive, and buy a delightful smooth-riding turbo. Would you believe it that our roughriding gasguzzling fourwheeldrivingsonofabitch got stuck up at Agua León last week—for a mere eighteen galling hours. Finally, through slipping and skidding, the sob wound up at the edge of an abyss, and I was sorely tempted to pull out the stones we had under the other three wheels, and let the sob go. However, we were out in the middle of no where, and the insurance people had recently paid me for a total-loss on a four-wheel-driving Ram-charger, so we finally got a tackle with three woodsmen, and tied to a treetrunk actually pulled the damn truck sidewise from the abyss, until I could coast down to a niche and turn around. But I think it does an old fart good to have the shit scared out of him now and then, Billie, don't you agree? Afterwards, at least for a time, an ordinary life seems by comparison quite enchanting.

This last trip, from which I returned last night, showed me the colossal difference adequate chains can make on a sob. (Four-wheeldrive = sob). Due to rampaging rainstorms, no lumber trucks had been on the move for eleven days, so the whole range of El Viejo was my preserve. I hate meeting those trucks coming down the mountain, and having to back up a mile or two on the steep scary tracks before they can pass, with thousand-meter drops nudging me. Then, if C's with me, I turn the truck over to him for a while.

Incidentally, before the rains began, while El Viejo was dry as tinder, a forest fire broke out on the summit, burned fifteen days, and consumed the whole top of the mountain (utterly free of grazing) before it was finally put out by a hundred men, including Federal Troops. Supposedly, the fire was started by lightning, which is often blamed for our forest fires. But as you well know, we don't have forests like those of Oregon and British Columbia,

where you have impossible jumbles twenty-feet deep of new and ancient humus. Our forests are open, park-like, and I think they are almost always deliberately set on fire by one Miguelito, who invariably blames "un trueno" for the fire. As you may recall *Mathiasella bupleuroides* was a dominant species on the heights of El Viejo, which led me to solemnly promise Dr. Constance some seed. But now that it's utterly gone, what'll I do about my solemn promise? As the Jamaicans say—sheeeeeit, man? Maybe you could tell Dr. Constance that I didn't get his seed because I broke my ass, or something. (Kidding aside, though, I've found a few *Mathiasella*'s down below, and hope they'll produce some seed for Dr. Constance—if the peripatetic asshole goat don't beat me to them.)

We've been trying to get a permit to collect and send herbarium specimens abroad, and we seem, strangely enough, to be on the right track. Among other things, I pointed out to the Lords of Inexorable Reason, that there are only about thirty botanical collectors in all Mexico. Assuming that each collector makes twenty trips a year, which is a lot, and assuming that at each trip each collector takes ten kilos of specimens, which is again a lot, (and without dwelling upon the fact that much collecting is a matter of pruning, which increases growth), we have 6,000 kilos of vegetation, a mere six tons of herbarium specimens a year. On the other hand, we have thirty-six million head of cattle, three million horses, and twenty-one million goats, sheep and pigs, for a total of sixty million grazing beasties. Assuming that half of these are properly taken care of in adequate grazing lands, which is a lot, and that the other half are turned out to graze the national territory helter-skelter, we have thirty million cows, horses, goats, sheep and pigs eating not forage crops but everything in sight, including a coupe of tourists from Topeka, Kansas. Each of these miserable mangy starving shambling slutty slattern shabby shitty shiftless shameful sore-assed animals consumes at least ten kilos of vegetation per day, or a yearly 3,650 kilos, for a total of a hundred and eighty two million tons a year. Now, I ask you, Billie, with the aid of your trusty computer and other secret methods you no doubt have at your distinguished disposal, if you were a bush, a tree, a terrestrial orchid, or even an untouchable German tourist, what do you think would do more damage to our flora, thirty collectors bringing home, along with a moldy piece of pork crackling they gnawed at but didn't finish for lunch because of three broken teeth, six selected tons of herbarium specimens a year, or having thirty million mangy starving shitty shabby shady screwy sheddy sore-assed cattle chomping their way, just prior to dropping dead

of inanition, blind staggers, aids and Almyer's disease, chomping their way through a hundred and eighty-two million tons of assorted but unsustaining vegetation? I can tell you honestly, Billie, that at this question, rhetorical as it might seem to you and Guy, I could see a blush of shame mingled with a new and corruscating enlightenment dawning upon the faces of our honorably distinguished bureaucrats. Now, before you accuse me of slovenly thinking, by acidly pointing out that I've skipped both the not inconsiderable multitudes of donkeys and mules ravaging our countryside, let me hasten to assure you, Billie, that I'm saving both donkeys and mules as weapons of last resort. In case I ever find myself on the losing end of the argumentative stick, supposing some enlightened bureaucrat were to advance a disquisition to the effect that botanical collectors consume not ten but ten thousand kilos a trip, I could providentially throw the donkeys and mules into the gap, and still come out a winner of the scrap. But where would you place the emphasis? With the six tons of herbarium specimens we discriminating mortals collect each year, or with the hundred and eighty-two million tons devoured by our wretched scurvy scrounging scurrilous shitty cattle? Put a starving cow into a mixed forest, and what chance of survival does anything lower than a tree have? Off some trees, they'll even eat off the bark, girdling the trees as they die of hunger. . . .

Kindest personal regards to you both.
Jaime